

An Author's Tribute to the "Mercury 13" Women

In writing *Almost Astronauts*, I grew to have a deep connection to the women known as the "Mercury 13." Learning about their story, getting to know the complexities of the history involved, and discovering the personalities of these amazing women was at times all-consuming. I was struck by how passionate they all were about flying from a very young age. In addition to telling their story to the best of my abilities, I wanted to pay tribute to the girls they once were by capturing the moment when each of these fantastic female fliers realized she was destined to take to the sky. I thank them for all they have shared with me and hope you enjoy this extra insight into some true American heroines.

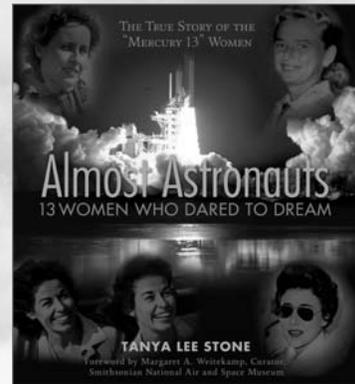
Sincerely,
Tanya Lee Stone

Thirteen Little Pilots

Once upon a time, there were thirteen little girls who shared one big dream. They all wanted to fly.

See how they soared.

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Almost Astronauts 13 Women Who Dared to Dream

by Tanya Lee Stone

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Wally Funk

Sky Leap

First flight, five years young,
draped in her Superman cape,
arms spread, breath held,
tippy-toes leave barn roof behind.

Crisp blue sky
wraps wispy arms around.

Slow-motion hurtling
down,
down,
down.

Into the sweet warm bed of hay.
Sky leap launches a life of flight.

Jerri Sloan Truhill

Girl-soldier

Mother shakes her head and sighs,
dining room's a mess again,
big guns ready, air patrol,
poised in cockpit:
Girl-soldier in control.

Jerri Sloan Truhill

Girl-flier

Helmet mashes corkscrew curls,
goggles flatten eyes and nose,
small feet blur and pedals fly,
prop blades spin:
Girl-flier sails on by.

Irene Leverton

Balsa Bird

Paper-thin wood,
smooth and soft, bends just right
in tiny hands.

Presto-chango—
graceful balsa bird
born from a pile of parts.

Bird in hand,
she races up three flights of stairs,
leans over balcony rail—Whoosh!

Wooden wings aloft.

The race is on!
Back down she speeds,
clompety-clomp, clompety-clomp, clompety-clomp.

Front door bangs open,
Shoes hit pavement,
Heads up—here she comes!

Hands reach high,
balsa bird fly,
into her arms back from the sky.

Jean Hixson

Barnstormer or Bust!

Ever since she saw Amelia
climb out of that plane,
her mind was made up.

Daddy gave up saying No.
It was no use.

She was going up in that barnstormer's plane
no matter how many chores she had to do.

Promises were made.

A deal was struck and a dream begun.

She left the earth behind
on a sunny summer day.

Yee-Hah!

Gene Nora Stumbough Jessen

A Natural

Just once.

That's all it takes.

Just one person who sees you,
and helps you see yourself.

He gave her the stick
and said, "Take it."

He called her "a natural"
and changed her life forever.

B Steadman

Flying Solo

Time to go

. . . solo.

Teacher hops out,
open seat huge in its emptiness.

Only comfort, an airplane.

Butterflies swarm
in her stomach.

Breathe, girl.

Courage beats fear.

Taxi down the runway,
pick up speed,
pull throttle back,
wheels lift off . . .

Flying solo.

Breathe, girl.

The air up there is fine.

Marion & Jan Dietrich

Twin Engines

A plane buzzes overhead.
Two heads tilt waaaay back in one smooth move.
Bit! . . . by the flying bug.

The twins hatch a long-term plan in the first grade.
Birthday money won't be wasted on candy.
It won't buy toys.
They rake in cash along with leaves.

Hard-earned dough is saved, not spent.
Saved in a Flying Fund
until their 16th birthday.

To celebrate
they take tests, fill out papers,
and give themselves the best present ever—
A matching set of student pilot passes!

Myrtle "K" Cagle

Pint-sized Powerhouse

Good things come in small packages:
a pretty ring
in a velvet box,
a chocolate kiss,
or a pint-sized person
propped up on pillows in the cockpit
so tiny feet can reach the rotors!

This petite powerhouse
would never let a little thing
like being small
keep her from reaching
her giant dreams.

Sarah Gorelick Ratley

Freedom Fly

Free as a bird,
isn't that the saying?

Makes perfect sense.
Birds rise higher
than voices raised.

Down below, everything looks tiny—
cars, trees, people, buildings,
the biggest of problems seem small.

Up in the air, that's where freedom breathes.
Freedom to dare,
to fly, to try
to be exactly who you want to be,
turning your dreams into your reality.

Rhea Hurrle Woltman

One Heart, Two Homes

Watched that mail plane,
once a day,
fly above the farm.

Flying in,
and flying out,
high above the farm.

Went to college,
came back home,
taught school near the farm.
That flying bug
still in her blood,
had to leave the farm.

Houston, Texas,
was the place
she went to learn to fly.

She kept the farm
close to her heart.
Her second home, the sky.

Jane Hart

To Spy or Fly?

The makings of a perfect spy—
brave, courageous, daring.

Mother knows she means business,
this girl isn't fooling around;
fear looms large.

To soften the blow
Jane trades in dreams of secret lives and spies,
and settles for the skies.

But her compromise doesn't get her the green light.
Under cover, she creeps off
on her own secret mission
—flying lessons.

One day Eddie Rickenbacker,
World War I hero of the skies,
comes to Jane's House.

Flying down the staircase
to meet the famous ace,
she hears something that
brings her feet to a screeching halt
on polished wooden steps.

Father has found her out!
Her secret's not so secret.

But wait—is he . . . bragging?
His hearty laughs and proud remarks
lift her spirits sky-high.

Jerrie Cobb

Skyward Bound

Love streams from tips of ten slim fingers
cuts through grease,
soaks deep down into crevices
of axles and plugs,
feeds new life into the tired old 2-seater.

Bumping down the pasture,
suddenly sky-borne,
smooth-sailing, floating,
wind whistling,
heart racing, sleek machine
obeying the slightest command of her hand.

A single thought booms,
thunders,
soars, over the roar of the engine:

I Am Home.